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## HAPPINESS IS A HOHNER

The exquisite strains of Vivaldi, Telemann and Bach are familiar to aficionados of Baroque music. For Bob Thompson, Executive Office MAS, the music has a slightly different sound—he plays it on his harmonica.

Bob began playing the harmonica six years ago, when the enforced inactivity following a heart attack began to wear down both him and his wife. Looking for a hobby, he thought of the harmonica, an instrument he had played briefly in his boyhood. The harmonica seemed to suit his needs perfectly. It was inexpensive and easy to carry (an important factor since his work requires some travel). Even better, it seemed a good weapon in his fight against smoking, so essential to a heart-attack patient, since more than half the notes are drawn.

Once the decision was made, all that remained was to buy the instrument and select a teacher. Bob purchased a chromatic harmonica, different from the Marine Band variety by virtue of a rod which slides back and forth producing sharps and flats. Finding the harmonica wasn't hard, but finding a teacher proved to be something of a challenge.

"Everyone was convinced that all harmonica players are self-taught,"

Bob says. "Fortunately I was in a music store one day and found a Music-Minus-One record for harmonica that plays all the parts but the one you're learning, allowing you to fill it in." The enclosed booklet described the author of the course: Cham-Ber Huang, who was born in Shanghai, came to this country in 1950 and was teaching harmonica at the Turtle Bay Music School in New York City. "This was just what I was looking for. I started taking lessons with him shortly after returning to work."

Bob has high praise for the man who has given him so much over the past several years. Although Cham-Ber, who took the name because of his love for that form of music, teaches, arranges and conducts, he now devotes most of his time to improving the design and construction of the harmonica at the Hohner Harmonica Plant in Hicksville, Long Island.

Bob, one of the three advanced students who are now carrying on most of Cham-Ber's teaching duties, instructs at the Third Street Music School in Manhattan on Saturday mornings. (The Third Street school is an H&S client whose board includes

Mrs. Arthur B. Foye, wife of a former managing partner.) Teaching provides the opportunity to follow through on what has become a mission for him: impressing on others the seriousness and beauty of this instrument. "I like to teach young people," he says. "They are attracted to the instrument, and for them the music is a real joy."

While the harmonica, at least in its prototypal form, goes back to 2,500 B.C. when a Chinese emperor bound five bamboo tubes together, the chromatic harmonica is as recent as the 1920s. Because of its relative youth, performing technique is still in a developmental stage. People like Cham-Ber and his students are innovators, constantly developing their musical vocabulary. "The perennial compromise between what is musically desirable and physically feasible is moving slowly but surely toward the former."

Bob explains that there is more versatility to the harmonica than is generally thought. The sixteen-hole chromatic instrument can play any note within the range of four octaves plus one note, starting with C below middle C. Half tones are produced by a slide, operated with the right hand, which raises each note a semitone. Because the player has contact with

the instrument with both hands and mouth, greater control of tone and dynamics is possible.

The Hohner-CBH Professional 2016, which includes many of Cham-Ber's design ideas, is the harmonica Bob now plays. It is designed to be airtight, with longer-lasting reeds and a nonstick slide, plus better acoustical qualities. In fact, the instrument is so advanced over other models that it allows an immediate improvement in skill that would otherwise require a year of practice, according to Bob.

Bob dreams of overcoming one of the most difficult problems associated with playing classical music on the harmonica—trilling. A half-tone trill requires only the manipulation of the slide; but a whole-tone trill requires that the left hand shake the entire instrument rapidly back and forth and, in some instances, that the slide be coordinated with the shake. This technique is essential to the Baroque music Bob prefers. Because the harmonica includes all the notes within the ranges of the flute, oboe and other wind instruments, it is easy to appropriate many of the gems of eighteenth century composers such as Bach, Vivaldi, Telemann and Couperin. The year 1985 will be Bach's

tricentennial and Bob is looking forward to being able to play all his flute sonatas by then. But his favorite is the German composer Telemann, and he is hard at work mastering that music, too.

Last summer Bob attended and taught at the Grand Teton Music Festival in Jackson, Wyoming. Classes, ranging from the simple to the advanced, were held every morning and most afternoons. Instruction was also given in repairing the harmonica, something Bob says is important, since the wear and tear on an instrument can, in inexperienced hands, reduce its life to as little as four months. Bob and Cham-Ber's two other advanced students did some tutoring and performed in the evenings for what was, according to *Harmonica Happenings* (the publication of the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica) a very successful seminar.

For Bob, the harmonica has become more than a way of coping with the aftereffects of an illness, more than a hobby to occupy a few spare hours a week. It is an intrinsic part of his life, something for which he sets ambitious goals and from which he derives a very special satisfaction. ○